

## **Risen from the Dead**

John 20:1-18

By the time of the writing of the book of First Corinthians, estimated to be about AD 57, there was already the beginning of a creed to define a basic Christian profession of faith. That creed is recorded for us by the Apostle Paul in,

1 Cor. 15:3 “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”

That brief summary is “first of all,” of first importance. Everything else in Christianity stands or falls upon it. And as Paul would so forcefully declare later in that chapter, “if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!”

It doesn't get any more basic than that, does it? If the resurrection of Jesus Christ did not happen, if the account that I read a few moments ago is not historically true, if the events didn't happen as they are described, then you and I are still dead in our sins. And, to go one step further, if you don't believe these things to be true, then you are still dead in your sins.

But let me be quick to say, with Paul, “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” And that is the gospel I will preach to you.

So this morning, just a few days after Christmas, we come to what is often called the “Easter Story.” The resurrection. There is very good usefulness in connecting those two things, because Jesus' story is just one story. The incarnation and birth of Jesus brought forth the whole of his life. His obedience, his suffering. His death and his resurrection. He was born in order to die. He

was conceived in order to be raised from the dead. All those events are all fully connected. And let me emphasize that this is true. I know that this is real, with absolute certainty. I know that every word in this text is absolute and unchangeable truth. Because it is God-breathed, given by inspiration.

It is that certainty, that absolute surety, that Jesus instills in his closest followers after the resurrection. They began with great uncertainty, both the disciples and the godly women close at hand. I wouldn't call it unbelief, but it was certainly incomplete belief. The first details of the Easter story are really descriptions of,

### **I. HUMAN ACTS OF INCOMPLETE FAITH.**

Those godly women were there, attending to Jesus as best as they thought possible. Mary Magdelene is singled out by John, emphasizing her particular devotion to the Lord. Matthew adds that the other Mary was with her, Mary the mother of James. Mark adds the name of Salome and Luke adds Joanna, so there were at least four women there. Godly women, who had not forsaken Christ, but were eager to continue serving him. Yet in the incompleteness of their faith, they were now prepared to serve a corpse. And all of that, John tells us, because of,

#### **A. A lack of understanding of Scripture.**

v.9

Look at the details.

v.1-2

The obvious assumption was that someone had come and taken him away. Mary expressed her lack of understanding later, when the angel spoke to her.

v.13

And even when Jesus himself spoke to her, she says the same thing,  
v.15

The disciples share in this incomplete faith, and are much more worthy of criticism than the women.  
v.3-8

Now, verse 8 could mean that John was the first to really believe, to understand the resurrection, but I tend to think it simply means he came to believe what Mary had told him. He merely believed that the tomb was empty. For the very next verse says,  
v.9

We also read in, Luke 24:10 “It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles. 11 And their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them.”

They did not understand Scripture. Not yet. Even though Scripture was plain. Jesus himself had been as plain and clear as he possibly could have been, and throughout the OT prophets there had been a clear testimony of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus would use that testimony later, rebuking and correcting those two men on the road to Emmaus,

Luke 24:25 Then He said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! 26 “Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” 27 And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.

Along with that incomplete faith, and actually because of it, we see in all the people that resurrection morning,

## **B. The confusion of grief.**

Faith had been replaced by grief. Instead of joyfully testifying to the truth of what Jesus had told them previously, they could only think about the reality of his death.

v.10-11

Mary, perhaps as we would expect as a woman, was more outward in her show of emotions. She was weeping. James and John, as men, demonstrated their grief with apparently silent bewilderment. They just left and went back to their homes, in a daze, as the words seem to imply. They marveled, according to Luke 24:12, amazed and befuddled by what they had seen.

But God didn't leave them to marvel in ignorance! Indeed, the focus of all these events is,

## **II. GOD'S WORK OF BUILDING FAITH.**

God didn't have to do it this way, did he? He didn't need to have the stone rolled away and have the angels come. God didn't need to have Jesus himself appear. He could have made the ascension come immediately after the resurrection. He could have done it behind closed doors, so to speak. There was no reason within the revealed nature of God that made any of this necessary.

But there was a reason in the weakness of man. We needed it! And that can really be the only reasonable answer for the delay between the resurrection and the ascension. The weakness of our faith needed time to be built up.

Let's see how God accomplished that. First,

### **A. God revealed himself in the empty tomb.**

Not only was Jesus gone, but the stone was rolled away so that people could see it!

v.1-2

The word used for the stone being removed is quite fascinating, seeming to imply that the stone was lifted out of the groove in which it ran. The stone was not just rolled away, as miraculous as that would have been. It was lifted up and presumably put somewhere else.

And remember, Matthew tells us this was a large stone! You have to wonder how these women expected to roll the stone out of the way to anoint Jesus' body, but as it turned out, they didn't have to face that problem. It was already lifted up and carried out of the way. The tomb was empty.

Mat. 28:2 "And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. 3 His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. 4 And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men."

And for further emphasis, for further faith building, we read that the grave clothes remained behind.

v.5-7

Now, at the very least, that is strange. There would be no conceivable explanation to the disciples. This was not the scene of a robbery, there had been no haste nor violence. All these details were evidences of the miraculous work of God, intended to build the faith of these witnesses. And intended to build our faith.

Now, please don't get carried away with superstitious silliness, like thinking that image of Jesus' face was somehow imbedded into that cloth. Or that the cloth, the burial shroud, somehow still exists today with Jesus' image impressed upon it, the so-called shroud of Turin. Stick to the miracles described in the Bible. And imagine viewing that scene yourself, the empty tomb.

## **B. God also revealed himself in the presence of angels.**

Again, let me say it. God didn't have to send angels to explain these events. But he did, because of the inability of man to understand any other way.

v.11-13

Truly, these angels are "ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation." Then, the greatest demonstration.

## **C. God revealed himself with the resurrected presence of Jesus.**

There would be time between the resurrection and ascension. There would be opportunity for people to see the resurrection Jesus in the flesh, and even to touch him. There would be time for Jesus to teach, and to more fully explain what had taken place.

And so on that resurrection Sunday, we read that Jesus himself appeared.

v.14-16

There is such marvelous grace in all of that. Such tenderness and gentleness. And such a high honor given to this woman named Mary Magdalene. The first appearance was to her. And he did so with such personal attention. He begins by asking her whom she was seeking. And then he identifies himself by calling her by name!

Actually, Jesus used the Aramaic form of Mary's name, calling our Miriam. He spoke her name personally, in her own daily, ordinary language, with warm love and tender compassion. And immediately, Mary knew who had spoken her name. She responded, also in Aramaic, Rabboni, my teacher.

Understand from that just how personal an appearance this was. And think, perhaps, of how you identify yourself, to those closest to you. Husbands and wives will almost always have pet names for one another, words of special and personal attention. And sometimes, the use of the first name, is a particularly tender way of communicating.

Jesus is addressing this woman with as much affection and personal connection as is possible. And just as my own daughters will immediately recognize my voice when I arrive home from work in the afternoon, Mary knew that this man standing before her was her good shepherd, who “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

Mary knew the voice of her good shepherd, and at that point, her faith had been fully restored.

v.18

God’s work is to build faith, and my work in preaching to you the word of God is the very same. To build your faith. So all of this is a useless and empty exercise unless you, with Mary, can read these words of Scripture, and say, “I have seen the Lord.”

This whole thing we call “church” is of no value unless you are brought to the presence of God, and in seeing and hearing his own revelation in Scripture, you come to believe and have your faith built up. The activity of church isn’t enough if it leaves you unchanged. The activity of the church isn’t about your own enjoyment. It is about knowing and understanding God. And God’s work is to build faith.

That work is evident in Mary, a woman whom we see,

### **III. WALKING BY FAITH.**

And for her, that faith is simple. She believed what Jesus said to her. She believed it was Jesus who said it.

v.18

That’s what it is all about.

#### **A. We must believe what Jesus has said.**

And how does Jesus speak to us today? Through his word, his living and active word. Jesus speaks to us on the pages of Holy Scripture, for this is his word. Jesus is the prophet, so clearly portrayed in the OT prophets. He is the word who became flesh. And knowing that God has “at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets,... in these last days [he has] spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.”

That’s what it means to walk by faith, to live your life in the shadow of the reality of the truth of God’s word. To walk by faith is to live according to the word of God. To believe what it says, to do what it commands.

Walking by faith is not a subjective, emotionally oriented self-centered experience. It is living your life, day after day, in the conscious awareness and submission to the word of God found in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Nothing more, nothing less. And if, somehow, for you, walking by faith means disregarding the written revelation of Scripture, then you are contradicting yourself.

With Mary Magdalene, therefore, we must say, “I have seen the Lord,” for we see his written revelation just as certainly as she saw his physical body. And with her, we must believe the things which he has spoken to us.

In that, there is a danger Mary faced, and one Jesus specifically identified.

v.17

I think we could translate that, “Stop clinging to me.” “Stop touching me,” even. Stop laying hold of my body.

I believe there is a very familiar and often accepted way in which we fall to the same danger for which Jesus rebuked Mary, and that is in clinging to visual images and even pictures of Jesus, that reflect his humanity. There is a great danger in hanging a picture on your wall claiming to be a picture of Jesus, for in the second commandment we find this requirement, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.”

In much the same way, we ought not to cling to a picture of Jesus that is, because of our own ignorance, not a picture of Jesus at all. It is just a figment of an artist’s imagination, a likeness of a man ascribed to be Jesus.

But even if it were accurate, even if the disciples had an iPhone and could send a picture of Jesus to everyone they knew on Snapchat and then post it on Facebook, or even if an official portrait had been commissioned, Jesus still says to this dear, dear woman, “Stop clinging to my body?” And I believe he would say the same thing to those who cling to visual images.

But we might think, Why? The answer is clear. “For I have not yet ascended to My Father.”

And so, walking by faith means that,

## **B. We must believe in Jesus’ ascension.**

For Mary, and the others who saw Jesus in his resurrected body, this was a very obvious and practical thing. They would, naturally, be quite delighted to have Jesus among them again. He arose from the dead!

But Jesus’ resurrection wasn’t a mere resuscitation, as, for example, the case of Lazarus. Lazarus was raised from the dead, but only to resume his mortal life. Jesus was raised from the dead in an entirely different manner. His resurrected body was no longer subject to mortality. And with that resurrected body, he would soon ascend to the right hand of the throne of his father in heaven.

In other words, Jesus is no longer confined to this earth, and I believe that is the reason he said what he did to Mary. Interestingly, at other times, especially with Thomas, Jesus permits and even encourages people to touch him. And he does so for the building of their faith. But remember what he said to Thomas,

John 20:27 Then He said to Thomas, “Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.” 28 And Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Jesus said to him, “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Jesus says, “Stop clinging to me.” My life is no longer physically connected to this world. My relationship with you can no longer be based on physical contact, being able to hug me and touch me and even live with me. During the 40 days before his ascension, Jesus appears at various times to his disciples, but he no longer lived among them as he had before. The ascension

would be delayed only so that there would be adequate eyewitness testimony of his resurrection.

Therefore, this would be the preaching of the church beginning at Pentecost,

Act 2:32 “This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. 33 “Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. 34 “For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: ‘The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, 35 Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’” 36 “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

So the resurrection cannot be separated from the ascension. And the resurrection was not the final miracle, and it ought not to be the ultimate message preached even if this were Easter Sunday. In Jesus’ own words,

Luke 22:69 “Hereafter the Son of Man will sit on the right hand of the power of God.”

And so the message of the cross is the message of,

Eph. 1:19 “...the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power 20 which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. 22 And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

Do you believe this? That is my challenge? Do you believe

that Jesus Christ is now in the position of highest authority in all heaven and earth? That he is ruling now, even ruling the nations of this world and governing and directing all the affairs of men?

Do you believe that he rules as the only head and king of this church? That he lived as a man, and died a real human death. That he rose from the dead. And is not seated at the right hand of the Father in Heaven.

That is the gospel. It is the message of Christmas. The message of Easter. It is the message of pentecost. And the message of the church throughout this age, that “God has made this Jesus, who was crucified upon a cross, both Lord and Christ.”

Surely, there is salvation in none other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.